

'Big Band Dessert Dance' wins \$1,091 hot dish microgrant

Four finalists pitched their ideas for "building community in Detroit Lakes" during the Monday, Nov. 17 competition at Bucks Mill Brewing, hosted by local nonprofit Project 412.



Gary Christensen, center, beams as he accepts the first-place prize from Hot Dish emcees Greg Johnson and Sarah Hofmann — who went by the names "Tater" and "Tot" during the festivities — after his proposal for "Big Band Dessert Dance" garnered the most votes at the Monday, Nov. 17, 2025 microgranting dinner hosted by Project 412. Vicki Gerdes / Detroit Lakes Tribune

By Vicki Gerdes

November 18, 2025 at 7:02 PM

DETROIT LAKES — More than 200 people filled Bucks Mill Brewing's taproom to capacity for the third installment of Project 412's Hot Dish Microgranting Dinner on Monday, Nov. 17.

Each guest paid the \$5 suggested donation at the door, with the money being pooled to form a \$1,091 microgrant that would go to the people's choice winner among [the four finalists selected](#) for the competition.

After dining on Tater Tot Hotdish supplied by local caterers Pam and Don Skarie, the standing-room-only crowd listened eagerly as finalists Gary Christensen, Matt Davis, Dawn Duncan and Berit Score pitched their ideas for "building community in Detroit Lakes." Each presentation was limited to four minutes, plus an additional 12 seconds to wrap up once time had been called. The audience was then given the opportunity to ask questions of each presenter before the next one took the stage.

After the last presenter was finished, audience members were asked to cast their votes to determine the winner: That was Gary Christensen, whose idea of bringing "Big Band Dessert Dances" to the Historic Holmes Theatre proved to be the most popular of the night.



A full house of more than 200 people packed both levels of Bucks Mill Brewing in downtown Detroit Lakes for the third installment of Project 412's Hot Dish Microgranting Dinner on Monday, Nov. 17, 2025. Vicki Gerdes / Detroit Lakes Tribune

"Imagine stepping back in time to the era when the bands of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Benny Goodman played in packed ballrooms of enthusiastic music lovers, yearning for a chance to forget the worries of the week and dance their cares away," he said.

Christensen is a member of the Beachfront Big Band, which was originally formed as Doc and the Scrubs by the late Dr. Robert "Doc" Watson in 1991. The band was rebranded late last year, to go along with revitalizing its sound and expanding its reach to include more than twice-yearly appearances at the Detroit Lakes City Park.

At Hot Dish, Christensen proposed that the band would play for dances at the Holmes Theatre's Midwest Bank Ballroom, maybe 3-4 times a year, starting at 7 p.m. — giving guests plenty of time to enjoy dinner at a local restaurant before coming to the Holmes.

Upon entering the ballroom, they could choose from a variety of specially catered desserts, grab a drink or two, and sit down to listen to the music — or just dance the night away.

"These events would provide an opportunity for lakes area residents of all ages to connect with one another, to meet new residents, to hear some great music played by the only big band based in Detroit Lakes, and to put on their dancing shoes," he said. "They would be free to attend, with the only cost being for the desserts or beverages purchased."

Guests could, however, choose to make a free will donation, with proceeds going to support the Holmes Theatre — the band would provide its services free of charge.



Hot Dish Microgranting Dinner emcees Greg Johnson, right, and Sarah Hofmann — who dubbed themselves "Tater" and "Tot," respectively, for the occasion (their nicknames were embroidered on the back of their matching shirts) — kept guests entertained during the festivities at Bucks Mill Brewing on Monday, Nov. 17, 2025. Vicki Gerdes / Detroit Lakes Tribune

“The events will be held during the late fall, winter and spring, when the number of live music events drops off, and let’s be honest, we all want to get out of the house and go somewhere,” Christensen said.

Though Christensen walked away with the cash prize for his proposal, Project 412 Executive Director Amy Stearns said that they would like to see all four ideas proposed at Monday’s dinner become reality.

Those ideas included the following:



Finalist Matt Davis pitches his idea for "Community Soup and Bread Suppers" during the Hot Dish Microgranting Dinner at Bucks Mill Brewing in Detroit Lakes on Monday, Nov. 17, 2025. Vicki Gerdes / Detroit Lakes Tribune

- **“Community Soup and Bread Suppers,”** presented by Matt Davis: These suppers would take place at the Congregational Church in Detroit Lakes, every Wednesday night at 5:30 p.m., starting in December.

The church would supply the bread, and the soup. All that attendees would need to do is “come hungry,” Davis said.

“It’s completely free; open to everybody,” he added. “We expect people to just show up. The idea is to provide nourishing food, fellowship, and to help build our community. The table is set, everyone is welcome.”



Finalist Dawn Duncan pitches her idea for "Art of the Dog" during the Hot Dish Microgranting Dinner at Bucks Mill Brewing in Detroit Lakes on Monday, Nov. 17, 2025. Vicki Gerdes / Detroit Lakes Tribune

- **“Art of the Dog,” presented by Dawn Duncan:** A series of “stick libraries” could be erected around town, with locally produced art to decorate them and sticks gathered from around the community for dogs to chase.

“I’m a local entrepreneur, and I love dogs and art,” Duncan said. “I’ve come up with this fun idea that I call ‘Art of the Dog,’ because what brings people together more than our animal friends?

“We have a huge opportunity to put Detroit Lakes on the map in a whole different way ... to be the most pet-friendly city in Minnesota. My idea, incorporating dogs and art... is to install what’s called a dog stick library. It can start with just one (stick), or maybe multiple ones, but this is a way to engage our pet

friends, and of course, their owners ... maybe people who don't even live here. These would be fun meeting spots where dogs can grab some sticks, which are free, provided by nature."

Duncan described these spaces by asking the crowd to "imagine a big piece of wood between two fence posts. And attached to that is, perhaps, a handcrafted wooden receptacle for sticks... maybe on both sides."

These boards, and the attached receptacles, would then be decorated with public art, supplied by doing a call for artists much as Project 412 has done for its murals, or Detroit Lakes Public Utilities for its power boxes.

"This is a way to give back to our canine community," Duncan said. "OK, there's all these humans living here, but think about how many dogs live here too!"

She then jokingly issued an apology to all the cats living in the community, adding, "I don't know how to do a catnip library, but maybe somebody could pitch that next year!"



Finalist Berrit Score pitches her idea for "The Sew-cial Club" at the Hot Dish Microgranting Dinner on Monday, Nov. 17, 2025 at Bucks Mill Brewing in Detroit Lakes. Vicki Gerdes / Detroit Lakes Tribune

- **“The Sew-cial Club,” presented by Berrit Score:** Monthly gatherings of sewists and other fiber artists at the Detroit Lakes Public Library, possibly held on Saturdays, so more people would be free to attend.

“It’s a space for sewists of all ages, all skill levels, all disciplines, whether that’s quilting or apparel making, to get together and just sew,” Score said. “It’s a space to share the joy of sewing, to inspire creativity, share ideas and projects, meet fellow sewists and hopefully make lasting friendships that span outside of the social club.”

She added, in response to a question, that they would be open to accepting donations of sewing machines and fabric, so that people

who didn't have their own supplies could try sewing and see if they liked it before investing a lot of money in it.

Score also noted, in response to another question, that the meetings would be open to "all fiber artists," including those who like to knit, crochet, weave, etc.

"Whether you've been sewing for 30 years or you just decided last week that you want to pick it up, I want this to be an encouraging environment for everyone to be involved in — an encouraging, creative community of sewists that support each other and are there for each other and inspire other projects. And to learn and grow together."